




# City-County Relations

## The Importance of Collaborating on Service Delivery at the Local Level

**Establishing an environment of cooperation over competitiveness is hard work, but the outcomes can be well worth the effort.**

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A hand holding a large, light-colored wooden puzzle piece against a solid orange background. The hand is positioned on the right side of the frame, with the thumb and index finger gripping the edges of the puzzle piece. The puzzle piece has a human-like shape with a head, torso, and limbs. The background is a solid, vibrant orange color. The overall composition is simple and focused on the act of holding the puzzle piece, symbolizing collaboration and fitting into a larger picture.

**In New York State,** counties are responsible for public health, human services, jails, and rural roads and bridges. Cities tend to focus on police, fire, recreation programs, general public works services, and water/sewer utilities. Although there are commonalities and occasional overlap, they each have distinct missions. Building effective relationships between these levels of governments can enhance services and reduce costs. Frequently, these agencies compete for resources, whether they are property taxes, state aid, grant funding, or sales tax revenues. Establishing an environment of cooperation over competitiveness is hard work, but the outcomes can be well worth the effort.

### Principles of Collaboration

There are certain principles of collaboration that should be addressed in order to raise the likelihood of success. Here are some important principles that help in fostering such relationships:

#### Atmosphere of Respect

In the early stages of a collaborative effort, the parties should establish a foundation of mutual respect, recognizing the distinct roles and responsibilities each entity possesses.

It's important to acknowledge that different levels of government bring unique expertise and authorities to the table. By understanding and respecting these differences, as well as ensuring that each party operates within its designated area of responsibility, potential conflicts can be minimized, facilitating better cooperation.

Service delivery at the local level has been increasingly difficult over the years, as expectations from the public to provide quality, responsive service delivery seem insatiable. Providing services in partnership with other government agencies and local stakeholders has become vital to meeting the public's expectations at a price they can afford. One of those key partnerships is between local governments and their counties. This article explores some of the key success factors to healthy city-county relations and provides a few examples from Western New York.

## Mutual Benefit

Cooperative relationships work best when each party derives significant value from the arrangement. This requires each entity to clearly articulate its individual goals, thereby fostering a thorough understanding among all stakeholders involved and enhancing the likelihood that common goals can be achieved.



The city of Corning in Steuben County, New York, USA

## Transparency and Accountability

Both cities and counties should operate with transparency and be accountable to each other and to the public. This requires open and clear communication to promote the sharing of information, discussing policies, and addressing issues promptly. Reducing the agreement to writing will help avoid misunderstandings during implementation and improve accountability for all parties.

## Examples From Western New York

Western New York has numerous examples of

collaborative service delivery to meet the needs of the public by drawing upon the strengths of each level of government.

## Emergency Medical Services

All over New York, counties and cities are faced with the challenge of the provision of emergency medical services. Historically, these were functions carried out by a mix of volunteer fire departments, volunteer ambulance companies, nonprofit organizations, and/or private companies. As training

requirements have increased, some places have experienced a downturn in volunteerism. In other areas, the for-profits and nonprofits have pulled out and re-established their operations in other, more profitable locations. In Livingston County, a mix of for-profit departures and local ambulance challenges led to the creation of what is now a full-service, county-wide emergency medical services department replete with basic and advanced life support service, including hospital transfers. The department fields more than 6,000 calls

for service for a small rural county of 62,000. Towns are able to ensure coverage, local ambulance departments still serving their communities are supported with back-end and mutual aid response efforts, and pre-hospital care coverage is prioritized in the county.

## Downtown Development

Livingston County Economic Development initiated a downtown revitalization program in 2003 with an enhanced focus on redevelopment of the central business corridors in each of the nine villages. The newly created Downtown Partnership requested buy-in from each of the villages for a nominal fee of \$4,000 annually and allowed access to various programs and technical assistance offered by a dedicated downtown coordinator managed by the county's economic development office. Over the years, this partnership has been able to offer rent subsidies, sign and facade grants, design guidelines, and entrepreneurship training programs to start or accelerate business growth.

Thus far, each of the villages has successfully implemented an award from



Livingston County Courthouse, New York, USA

the New York Main Street grant program, while some have received multiple awards totaling nearly \$6 million. The Livingston County Industrial Development Agency has implemented an annual community development program that has contributed just over \$1 million to the region and the Restore NY state-run grant program has invested an additional \$1.9 million. In 2022, Livingston County added another \$1 million in ARPA dollars to fund the Extreme Makeover program, which restored dilapidated buildings and properties. The Livingston County Development Corporation funded \$200,000 for a public art festival in summer 2023, which created a wall-sized mural in each of the downtown communities.

Overall, Livingston County Economic Development and the Downtown Partnership has been directly involved in 497 projects resulting in over \$18 million of investment in various towns and villages.

Of that, just over \$10 million of assistance was originated by Economic Development through various downtown-focused grant funding programs. As a result, over 150 commercial spaces have been renovated and 122 upper-floor residential units have been created.

### **Blight Removal**

In 2016, the Steuben County Land Bank Corporation was established to assist communities within Steuben County in addressing the issues of blight caused by vacant, abandoned, condemned, and foreclosed properties. The board of directors consists of county and local officials working cooperatively to prioritize properties to be addressed and ensuring funding is fairly allocated throughout the county rather than being concentrated in a select few communities. This initiative has become an important tool for communities to stabilize neighborhoods, encouraging

private investment, and improving the quality of life.

In addition, Steuben County has established a program through its public works department to assist local governments with demolishing blighted properties. Under the arrangement, local governments are responsible for discontinuing all utilities to the property to be raised and paying for demolition and site restoration. The county handles the transportation of debris and waives tipping fees at the county landfill substantially reducing the cost to local governments. This initiative has allowed communities to address blighted properties that would traditionally sit vacant for several years.

### **Prisoner Transports**

In 2019, New York State required people arrested be provided defense counsel on arraignment. The Seventh Judicial District of New York adopted a centralized arraignment plan requiring individuals arrested to be arraigned in county court rather than city, town, and village courts as had traditionally been the practice. This system was instituted to ensure defendants had representation that could not readily be provided in the traditional decentralized model. Although solving one problem, the new plan placed a financial and staffing burden on local governments to transport detained individuals to the county seat. As a solution to this problem, local governments throughout Steuben County entered into transport agreements to have the sheriff's department conduct prisoner transports, a service that they were accustomed to and equipped to provide as the unit

of government responsible for the county jail. In order to pay for these services, Steuben County deducts the transport costs from local sales tax sharing agreements to ease the payment process.

### **Conclusion**

In summary, cooperative arrangements, as illustrated by examples in Western New York, can mutually benefit both cities and counties if properly designed. These partnerships are most successful when founded on principles of mutual respect, mutual benefit, and transparency and accountability. Shared emergency medical services, grant writing, downtown development, prisoner transports, and blight removal can provide innovative solutions for mutual success.

While not every type of service arrangement lends itself well to potential cooperation, many in fact do, and a hallmark of professionalized local government management is the seeking of efficiency measures for operational improvements. As cities and counties come under increased pressure to provide cost-effective services in an atmosphere of ever-increasing complexities, these collaborative relationships can assist in meeting the public's expectations. **PM**

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